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ABSTRACT

Oral history provides unusually rewarding opportunities for teaching writing. It teaches students to listen to the language of others and to understand the value of the "ordinary life." One method of teaching oral history in writing classes involves students' writing the story of any person who interests them. A variety of sources, academic and from within the general culture, may be used as models or sources of ideas. Students often write about relatives, and the writing enables both generations to understand better the lives of those perceived as remote and lacking in common ground. One student, for example, wrote an oral history of his grandmother, from whom he had long been estranged. The telling and writing of the oral history allowed grandmother and grandson to overcome generational, cultural, linguistic, and emotional differences. An important outcome of the use of oral history in the writing class is that students' confidence grows as they realize that they are contributing to an important genre, that their writing can be judged according to standards they find compatible to their own, and that they possess the essential ingredients of writing interesting and valuable oral histories. (Nineteen references are attached.) (ARH)

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Listening to See: The Place of Oral History in Composition Classes

It is not surprising that oral history provides unusually rewarding opportunities for teaching writing. One important reason for its effectiveness in composition instruction lies in its insistence that students listen, that they attend closely and scrupulously to the language of others. In an environment where students are usually so preoccupied with getting down their professors' words in order to pass their exams, this value cannot be overpraised, for with oral history students are not merely copying class notes; rather, they are recording an entire story which must then be given a coherent structure. Like most other data students acquire in their curriculae, the data oral history yields at first is conveyed inductively, yet in order to establish any kind of direction leading to coherence, students must then listen closely for the clues that will tighten the structure and inform the narrative.

Perhaps even more important than enabling students to listen and to discover the rewards of listening, oral history creates in students a better understanding of the composition--the elements and essential structures--of a life. Just as formal history illuminates the contexts of historical events and circumstances, oral history, with its emphasis on the validity

of personal statement, illuminates the ordinary life. Students learn that one's relationship to history can be highly personal, indeed quixotic, and still be legitimate: in other words, validity need not be reserved to the annotated, theoretical realm--the realm of the "abstract" that students so frequently mistrust. Students writing oral histories of their parents, for example, often discover their own relationship to historical contexts and are thus able to locate themselves more precisely in their own worlds, for they have discovered their own contexts.

In approaching the assignments of teaching oral history in writing classes, my methods have been largely empirical.[1] I have purposely constructed the assignments as open-ended as possible, with few strictures: find a person who interests the student and then attempt to capture that person's story, either in terms of his or her relationship to the past, or else in terms of a thematic relationship, such as major changes in the person's life or critical decisions or choices.[2] My premise underlining this kind of flexibility rests in my conviction that every person has a story to tell, regardless of the commonality of most experiences and the seemingly ordinary qualities that define most people's lives. My only stricture is that the students must like the person and must feel that the person is interesting--not unusual but interesting. This eliminates random choice of subjects and the inevitable inquisition that follows from poor choice. If students feel that their subject is interesting, they will respect the person by directing promising questions and listening carefully to their subjects' replies.

Since oral history as a genre is receiving a great deal of recognition from a variety of sources, academic and from within the general culture, the availability of sources is proliferating and will continue to grow. I have taken advantage of the variety of sources by using them as models that offer occasions for emulation as well as suggestions for departures. I never impose a set form or methodolgy. Indeed, one of the challenges of oral history lies in its flexibility, its very absence of a set format, and I've found that students, in realizing its lack of interdictions, can proceed without being haunted by the nagging demands of word requirements, regularity of methods, and established approaches. For example, Studs Terkel employs a minimum of authorial devices, and uses almost no summary; his introductions and textual asides are used reservedly and sparingly.[3] Robert Coles, in contrast, frequently relies on the kinds of devices that Studs Terkel rejects, such as interpretation and psychological analysis.[4] Yet both historians display a thoughtful and judicious dependency on devices, and it is this very thoughtfulness and control that enables the students to understand the importance of techniques and how they operate according to the nature of the narrative--an essential lesson in understanding that technique is the direct result of function. This lesson is critically valuable for all writing, for it extends far beyond the boundaries of oral history in its application to writing as a process.

Because oral history is public--i.e., it is not restricted to trained historians--students feel as if they are participating in a lively intellectual

and cultural process, one that travels beyond the limitations and peripheries of the classroom. They are not merely fulfilling an assignment for a particular class, then; rather, they are creating documents that possess a life separate from the confinements of the class. In creating awareness of their own function and value in writing oral history, a great deal of the futility and sense of the ephemeral that students too often feel with their conventional writing assignments is eliminated. There is something very gratifying in feeling that one's writing does possess an identity that cannot be extinguished once the assignment has been completed.

I have had many students who have selected grandparents or relatives who were not only of a different generation but of different ethnic groups as well. Cultural, geographical, and social differences had separated these relatives from their young descendants to the extent that they were known remotely, if at all. More like presences than actual people with definable and demonstrable personalities and characters, these relatives were seen by the young students as important, but as, somehow, not really "there." Once the students began to write the oral histories of their ancestors the process began whereby the young were brought into touch with their elders, enabling both generations to better understand the lives of those so commonly perceived as remote and lacking in common ground. Many of the narratives helped to explain what had appeared to the students like aloofness or indifference: behavior previously apprehended as withdrawl became understood within its wider context of the individual's life.

One student, a Mexican-American, had lost touch with his grandparents,

largely because of his own parents' insistence on speaking English at home--a common tendency in many first-generation American households--and this loss of language had all but eliminated communication between youngers and elders. This young man was in the process of re-acquiring the little Spanish he had casually picked up as a child by enrolling in a lower-division Spanish class at his university. With the opportunity to become acquainted with his grandmother through writing her oral history, his motivation to improve his Spanish increased, and what happened as a result was almost magical. At first his interviews with his grandmother were monitored by an aunt who was bilingual, and her presence was undoubtedly helpful in helping to break the ice, for she helped to clarify his purpose and the reasons for his interest in the life of a woman who had been previously all but ignored. Gradually, as his confidence in the language increased and as her misgivings in his enterprise dissipated, he was able to piece together her story without a translator or third party, relatively free from the fumblings and false starts that had characterized his early attempts at his grandmother's language. (Her Spanish was by no means the university-taught Castilian, but a semi-literate dialect of a remote village in Southern Mexico.)

As the grandmother became convinced that her grandson's interest in her life was genuine as well as academic, she revealed more of herself until they reached the stage where she offered him documents that marked important stages of her life. These documents included the usual birth certificates, baptism certificates, and forged immigration papers,not surprising in themselves. The one document that she produced that was astonishing was a birth

certificate of a child who had later died in Mexico just before the grandmother's immigration, for no one in the family had ever been aware of the child's existence. The grandmother's history, as it was finally revealed, was fascinating and often times gruesome: it included child abuse and neglect, as well as a rape and kidnapping by a renegade soldier. Revealing the whole saga for the first time had a kind of cathartic effect for both grandmother and grandson, for she discovered in her grandson an audience who could understand and appreciate the terrible necessities that had underlined the patterns of her actions and deeds. It is indisputably true that a life in retrospect makes more sense than the events in isolation that are most available as one examines experience. What this young student had accomplished was to make available the retrospective life of his grandmother, not only to himself but to other members of his family who had been unaware of what had happened to this silent woman. The family's pride in her and of her grandson's accomplishment in writing of her life resulted in their having bound, with accompanying documents, photographs, and maps, the oral history, which they then distributed to other family members, to friends, and often to casual visitors to their home.[5] Not that oral histories need be classified or treated like family photograph albums, but they can often buttress the foundations of a life in similar ways, except that pictures need explanation, amplification, and clarification: the viewer needs to be given the context of the image; oral histories, however, in using the language of the subject,

provide their own contexts and present their own descriptive texts.

Today oral histories are often used as primary sources in studies of the immigrant experience;[6] and they are stressed and used as focal points in feminist studies.[7] Ethnic disciplines, such as Black, Chicano, and Asian Studies, tend to rely on oral histories as primary sources. No longer is the genre cosidered specious or quasi-historical--too "personal" to be valid. Because of the acceptance of the genre, students in writing classes are less skeptical about their own contributions to the genre, for they are not being asked to experiment with unfamiliar, untested techniques; the genre they are working with has already proven itself and bears its own authenticity. It has been tried, tested, and approved, an important concern for students who often tend to be reluctant to explore unexamined, unaccepted territory.

There is something nicely democratic about oral history that students are quick to appreciate, which in turn enables their writing to be examined and judged according to standards they find compatible and sympathetic to their own. No longer do they feel bound by what they see as the arbitrary rules of the conventional essay. Grammar, punctuation, and the standard six-paragraph expository essay don't haunt them when they're writing oral history because they are free to create their own organization and to sensitively impose the rules and formulae of composition they have previously learned (and often acquired with a great deal of hostility and squeamishness). (I think it's important to recognize the everlasting effects and influence of their early training in writing. Although most teachers today do not devote

themselves exclusively to the refinements of the standard six-paragraph essay, there are still enough who teach writing prescriptively, imposing ultimatums concerning structure and diction that continually haunt students' expression. For example, I continue to hear students diffidently inquiring about the limits of the first-person"I" in their writing, a sure clue that old prescriptive forces are still alive and active.)

One of the delightful aspects of teaching oral history to composition classes lies in the multitude of sources available as models.[8] Most students' acquaintance with oral history is through hearsay, although a few who enroll in classes in ethnic and minority studies will have encountered the genre in these classes, and some will have attempted to write it in their classes. Those who have written it have invariably become such strong converts to its values that I usually leave it up to them to proselytize its worth. Thus I use no text, but I do place a variety of sources on library reserve for the students to become acquainted with the genre and to enjoy its unique contributions. I try to include a cross-section of histories, something I hope will interest each student. The first reaction of the students to the sources is usually that of surprise: here are ordinary people talking about events and eras that most students had understood and imagined only theoretically, and the material is communicated in ways that are immediate and exciting. (A good oral history will communicate that kind of excitement because it soundly locates the reader in place and time.) From their initial excitement, the students then find it remarkably easy

to go on to analyze those ingredients of the particular oral history that yield its interest and excitement, and from this process of analytical deduction they realize that they, too, possess the essential ingredients of writing interesting and valuable oral histories. I can't underestimate the importance of this confidence because it can (and should) have lasting effects that extend well beyond the duration of a class or beyond other kinds of specific, temporal limitations. We can't overstress the importance of confidence in writing, and surely confidence emerges with the writer's strong assurance that his or her commitment to a genre will produce a genuine contribution to its tradition and values.

It would be gratifying to conclude this look at the place of oral history in teaching writing by claiming that through the process of writing oral history all students become humanists, or historians, or some comparable and honorable species of convert. Of course they don't, and anything that produces instant conversion should be considered highly suspect. But I have found that students, through writing oral history, do learn to listen and to closely attend to the language of others; and they do discover that ordinary lives are not so "ordinary" (in the pejorative sense) after all: and they do develop an appreciation and understanding of the contexts of their lives: a process of civilization, then, accomplished through writing.

Footnotes

1 "Oral history--the systematic collection, arrangement, and preservation of verbatim accounts and opinions of persons who were witnesses to or participants in events of history to scholars." Glen Jeansonne, "Oral History, Biography, and Political Demagoguey: The Case of Gerald L.K. Smith," Oral History Review, 11, 1983, p.87. I have departed from Jeansonne's functional definition of oral history to include opportunities for thematic focus and development.

2 Decisions and decision-making now possess a mythology which can be seen in such popular works as Gail Sheehy's Passages and reflected in cliches regarding mid-life crises. The advantage to this currency is that students are familiar with the concepts and theories; the disadvantage lies in the cliches themselves.

3 Terkel's Hard Times never fails to appeal to students, perhaps because they are of an age whose parents and grandparents were part of the Depression, so the link between generations is especially strong. See Works Used for other works of Terkel that I have found helpful.

4 Robert Coles is not generally regarded as an oral historian, nor are his works classified as oral history. However, he does rely significantly on many of the major techniques of oral history, and I think that it's instructive to point this out to students, especially those who are just establishing acquaintance with the genre and its functions.

5

I continued to see this student for several years after he'd completed the course. The enthusiasm his family felt for his grandmother's oral history developed into other projects, with at least two other elderly relatives as candidates for bound volumes.

6

Local historical societies and various kinds of governmental andprivate organizations often possess archives full of untold treasures. Many communities are now conducting their own search for collective identity, perhaps as a response to the "Roots" fervor of a few years back.

7

Perhaps the strongest and most politically persuasive document in feminist studies is the oral history, from captivity and slave narratives to contemporary accounts of oppressed women in Third World countries. See my entries in Works Used for a small sample.

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